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# English Language Teaching in L2 Contexts: A Written Discourse Analysis Approach

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## **Abstract**

Over the years, research in language teaching and learning has engaged the attention of several scholars. Several methods that include audiolingualism, communicative teaching have been adopted in language learning and teaching especially in L2 contexts. However, it has been discovered that many of these methods have not been able to adequately equip learners with strategies to handle extended structure of sentences (text). In this paper, the author examines Written Discourse Analysis as an alternative method of language teaching in order to address some of the present challenges of teaching comprehension and analysis of extended texts in L2 classrooms. He argues that Written Discourse Analysis (WDA) (in e.g. McCarthy, 1993; Coulthard, 1994) enables learners to understand how to successfully handle any piece of language that will help learners to use the target language to perform different tasks. He then demonstrates the approach by analysing a text and gives practical suggestions on its implementation.

## **1.0 The Study of Discourse**

Beginning from around the late 1970s and early 1980s, scholars started to critically re-examine the roles of language in human society. Many language experts began to provide fresh insight into scholarship in the field of language study especially with the new understanding that language roles and functions in society went beyond the analysis of discrete, isolated linguistic items. They began to discover that a whole lot of factors usually congregate to influence language use in every context and studying a piece of language beyond the sentence level could provide a more holistic description of what language does and how it accomplishes the task in that context. The study of discourse as a piece of language that is functional began to receive more serious attention as some of the concerns the scholars especially on how the forms of text relate to its function are now being addressed. While some of these issues had been taken up in other earlier approaches to language study, what makes the study of discourse as an approach slightly unique is the investigation of language above the clause in examining naturally-occurring utterances.

The different theoretical perspectives notwithstanding, the general consensus is that discourse is viewed as the study of language as social interaction as well as how language plays some roles in the social contexts in which discourse is situated.

Many of these scholars attempt to provide insight into the study of language in relation to the situation in which it is used, which they described as discourse or 'text' - a piece of language that is functional, performing some specific tasks in some specific contexts (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 10-11). Brown and Yule (1983) and Schiffrin (1994) respectively see 'discourse' as a piece of language in use, and a system (a socially and culturally-organised way of speaking) through which particular functions are realized.

It is significant to mention that the study of discourse does not concentrate on just the functional dimension all alone. It does, in fact, recognise the necessity of studying the forms

of language alongside the functions which are germane to teaching a language. This view is supported in Rekema (1999:13) where discourse analysis is described as the discipline which studies the relationship between form and function in verbal and written communication.

The two major approaches to language study (i.e. formal and functional) have some implication for language teaching and learning. One is abstracted in order to teach or study how the rules of language work; the other is used to communicate something that is felt to be coherent.

Before the emergence of the discourse approach to language teaching, many linguists classified language teaching/learning into two broad traditional approaches: behavioral approach and the humanistic approach. The Behaviourists with scholars like Bloomfield, Skinner, and Watsons consider 'behavior as the product of heredity and environment, and more specifically, of conditioning, a process whereby certain stimuli promote certain responses'. This view gave rise to various audio-lingual methods, in which language was then seen as a process of habit formation. In terms of teaching, this theory emphasizes two concepts: incremental learning and mastery learning. It is analytical in approach and it focuses on how the learner is able master discrete item in the target language.

The humanistic approach focuses on the communicative needs of the individual learner which enables the learner to use the language communicatively when exposed to the target language( for details, see <http://www.lotsofessays.com/viewpaper/1692806.html>).

As stated earlier the focus of this present effort was motivated by the view of discourse analysts that exploring new ways of teaching and learning language in a non-native environment will provide resources and tools that will make learning another language a less cumbersome experience.

## **2.0 English Language Teaching in L2 Contexts**

Generally speaking, teaching English language as a second language is targeted at instructing non-native speakers of English and helping them to develop proficiency and competence in English. English language has a long history of growing from being the language of a nation to a world language. Crystal (1997) says that there 670 million native speakers and about 1,200 – 1,500 million speakers that are non-native but have reasonable competence in the language. British Council's English Project 2000 also adduce reasons why English will continue to attract the attention of learners. Among these factors are that English is the main language of books, newspapers, air traffic control, international competitions, pop music and advertising; three fourths of world's mails are written in English, 80% of world's electronically stored informed is in English, 40 million users of Internet use English, about 50 million learners of English in Central and eastern Europe. In most non-native communities, the functional capacity of English has been expanded, growing from being a mere colonial legacy in these countries to an official language, a lingua franca, language of law, among several other functional loads it has been made to carry. Nigeria is a typical example where English has been deeply rooted. And as the population of non-native speakers' communities continues to grow as a result of the increasing international relevance and importance of English, so is the need to continue to explore ways in which the language can best be taught and learned.

The teaching curriculum is usually spread across the various components of language learning. From writing, reading, pronunciation conversational skills, vocabulary development

to grammar and others, learners are exposed to various methods of developing proficiency and communication skills in the target language. Before the emergence of modern teaching methods that include multimedia and e-resources, scholars have experimented with several language teaching methods. These include: *audiolingualism* - (drilling as habit formation) and structuralism in language learning and teaching; (ii) *the cognitive approach*- creating awareness of the rules, assumes that responses are also the result of insight and intentional patterning. The approach suggests a variety of activities practised in new situations will allow assimilation of what has already been learnt or partly learnt. It ensures an awareness and a continuing supply of learning goals as well as aiding the motivation of the learner” The method encourages learner to make mistake which can lead to learning new rules, (iii) *the notional/functional approach*: focuses on the social purpose of utterances within given settings, and (iv) *the communicative language teaching*- emphasizes competence and performance. Learner must not only have ability to produce correct sentences, such must be able to acquire the knowledge of the rules for effective communication. Having the knowledge is one aspect but demonstrating the ability to use the language in concrete situations must be emphasized (for details please see <http://www.binternet.com/~ted.power/es/10308.htm>)

Most modern teaching techniques now take advantage of multiple intelligence such as musical, visual and kinetic exercises which involve all areas of the brain in effective English teaching in the ESL/EFL classroom( Modern Teaching Techniques and Strategies for ESL Teachers([http://esl.about.com/od/modernteachingtechniques/Modern\\_Teaching\\_Techniques\\_and\\_Strategies\\_for\\_ESL\\_Teachers.htm](http://esl.about.com/od/modernteachingtechniques/Modern_Teaching_Techniques_and_Strategies_for_ESL_Teachers.htm)))

Language teachers now have a whole range of theories, methodologies and resources from which they can adopt the best methods to the specific language classrooms and learners. As stated above, discourse analysis, as one of the latest investigative paradigms in language study has provided some resources and methods for teaching second language in most non-native environments, which can assist second language learners in developing communicative competence in the language.

### 3.0 Discourse Analysis and Language Teaching

In the 1990s some scholars began to apply some of the principles of discourse analysis(DA) to language teaching and learning. More recent scholarly works in this field prove that discourse has become a promising trend in current Language Methodology (e.g. Lomakina, 204). One important virtue of Discourse Analysis is that it has come to be associated with its ability to provide tool kits for virtually every aspect of language use in any human activity in society that include language learning or teaching a language.

One of the very first early works in which discourse analysis was employed as a tool for language teaching was the Birmingham Experiment (1975) by Sinclair and Coulthard at the University of Birmingham. The emphasis on Exchange Structure in classroom discourse laid the foundation for much later advance work on the use of discourse analysis in language teaching and learning. These scholars were primarily concerned with the particularly distinctive exchanges with an *initiation-response-feedback* [IRF] structure which characterize much formal teaching. Having observed teacher-student interaction in language classroom, they designed the basic exchange structure. Stubbs (1983) argues that they have claimed that if the exchange is defined as the minimal unit of interaction, then[IRF] is a primary structure for interactive discourse in general.

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As pointed out in (Opeibi, 2004:53), regardless of the shortcoming of the IRF methodology, language teachers can identify and adopt the most functional exchange structure that will engender a more pragmatic teacher-student interaction especially in second language classroom. Sacks (1969-71), Goffman (1971), Coulthard and Brazil (1981), among others, have also discussed exchange structure in language classrooms. Canale's (1983) work on communicative competence, for instance, dwells more on aspects of discourse analysis in language teaching. It is instructive to point out that one of the four areas of knowledge and skills that a learner should be exposed to, according to Canale, is *discourse competence*. The teacher is expected to allow the learner to acquire the knowledge of cohesion and coherence which deals with the organization of different speech event and the interpretive rules for relating the form to function in the structure of the texts.

Discourse Analysis has proved to be a useful tool in instructing language learners and guiding them towards a clear understanding and comprehension of stretches of utterances in the target language. Millward (2004) says that the introduction of discourse analysis in language classrooms has added a new frame to the understanding of language and its usage. The needs of students can be adequately catered for through the facilities that discourse analysis offers language teachers. One of the greatest advantages of applying Discourse Analysis in language teaching is that it will enable students to acquire the skills that will help them to comprehend and understand the nuances of communicative strategies in the target language since comprehension and understanding are the primary focus behind most forms of communication. As teachers our primary assignment is to ensure that we apply teaching strategies that equip our students to understand and use the language functionally. For instance, we must teach the use of cohesive devices (a key concept in DA) and more specifically discourse markers as a useful tool to enable students to make logical connections and coherent stretches of both written and spoken discourse.

Additionally, classroom interactions that provide opportunities for learners to use the language functionally are suggested. Discourse analytic techniques can be used by second language teachers to investigate the interaction patterns in their classrooms and to see how these patterns promote or hinder opportunities for learners to practice the target language. Demo then proposes a four-part process of Record –View –Transcribe –Analyze (See Demo 2001 for details). According to him, the process allows language teachers to study their own behaviour-specifically, the frequency, distribution, and types of questions they use and their effect on students' responses. Communicative activities should be promoted in the classrooms to allow students use the language among themselves.

Demo further suggests that one way that teachers can include the study of discourse in the second language classroom is to allow the students themselves to study language, that is, to make them discourse analysts (see Demo, 2001; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; McCarthy & Carter, 1994; Riggensbach, 1999; Opeibi, 2004). Obviously, when learners explore natural language use in authentic environments, they tend to understand discourse patterns associated with a given genre or communicative event as well as the sociolinguistic factors that contribute to linguistic variation across settings and contexts. Learners can, for example, be encouraged to study speech acts, turn-taking patterns in any selected speech event.

Riggensbach (1999) suggests a wide variety of activities that can easily be adapted to suit a range of second language learning contexts. So, one major ways in which discourse analysis can be applied in second language classrooms is not only to assess teaching practices of

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teachers themselves but also as a tool for studying interactions among language learners. Demo (201) concludes by also asserting that learners can benefit from using discourse analysis to explore what language is and how it is used to achieve communicative goals in different contexts. Communicative competence in the target language will be acquired faster and easily when the learning environment reflects actual and authentic communicative contexts.

#### **4.0 Discourse Analysis of Written Texts**

A discourse approach to studying written texts provides means for identifying written text genre that are differentiated by their purpose or function as well as their structure or form. Thus the description of structure and content forms the primary goal of the analysis of written text. This is because findings reveal that structure and content contribute significantly to the way readers read, understand, comprehend, remember and learn from written texts (Goldman 2004; 1997; Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000; Herbert, Englert & Bramman, 1983, Lorch, 1989). It has been established that discourse analysis provides a method for systematically describing texts that students read as well as those they write. It enables the students to identify the nature and describe the characteristics of the texts, which will enhance their understanding of the information contained in the text. Learners could also be equipped to compare one text with another within or outside the genre, in order to establish similarities and/or differences.

Hadley (2004:3) asserts that discourse analysis of written text is a method for describing the ideas and the relations among the ideas that are present in a text. The first step is to teach the students to first of all define the genre to which the text belongs before they can successfully describe the relations among the ideas in the text. The simple reason for adopting the perspective is because forms and contents cannot be the same in the texts in different genres. For instance, poems are different from drama texts, narrative stories different from persuasive essays; headlines, editorials news stories all have different forms. The implication the differences exhibited by these different texts even within the same genre is that there will be different relations among the ideas in the texts.

Further to the submissions above, the analysis of written text is also concerned with understanding the local relations among the ideas conveyed in a text, i.e. relations among information in sentences occurring relatively close together in the text. It is precisely the relations among ideas that define the coherence of the text and make it more than the sum of its parts. Written discourse communicates writer's content knowledge, belief, feelings, and command of the language (Goldman & Wiley, 2004). When learners are exposed to different written texts, they are made to learn and understand the writer's language.

The case has been made elsewhere (Opeibi, 2004) for the teaching of cohesion which will help learners to discover the meaning relationship in the texts and how to produce or write coherent discourse by using relevant cohesive devices.

Hasan's (1985) view on cohesion as a concept that is set up to account for relations in discourse conflate with Hadley's (2004) description of the goal of written discourse analysis. The main focus of analyzing written discourse is thus an attempt to understand and interpret language by recognizing and accounting for the set of possibilities that exist in the language for making texts hang together; the resources that are available to language users to convey his meaning in a coherent and intelligible manner.

### 5.0 Written Discourse Analysis: A Model for Language Teaching

It is common knowledge that written texts usually have some characteristics that make them different from spoken texts. Hadley (2004) observes that written texts conform to rules that most successful writers unconsciously follow and readers unconsciously expect to find. It would be of utmost benefit to teach second language learners these patterns that would equip them to interpret written texts successfully and become more proficient in the language. Most second language learners, most of the time, learn more about the target language, and communicate more effectively through the written medium. Previous teaching methods have concentrated too heavily on grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction with very little attention paid to how learners can handle text itself successfully.

McCarthy (1993) observes that Written Discourse Analysis (WDA), the proposed model, is not a new method for teaching languages, however, the extent of its applicability in second language classrooms is yet to receive much attention. Traditional pedagogical methods in language teaching and learning which concentrate on grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction (most popular among L2 teachers) have not been able to show learners how to successfully handle text itself. Written Discourse Analysis is "...a fundamentally different way of looking at language compared with sentence-dominated models" (McCarthy, 1993:170).

It argues that written text is naturally organized into several types of patterns. Some of the characteristic patterns in written discourse analysis that have been identified include: **Problem/Solution structure** (Hoey, 1994), the **Claim/Counterclaim structure** (McCarthy 1993), and the **General/Specific structure** (Coulthard 1994). It is believed here that if learners are taught how to recognise and study the textual and lexical elements of the texts, it would be easier for them to recognise the overall structure of the text and even classify it as a particular genre. This may also assist them to interpret the text and the function(s) the text is meant to perform.

Scholars have also identified a number of discourse markers that help readers to understand the local relations among ideas in a given text. For instance, connectives such as, *because*, *moreover*, *however*, as well as referential items and other signaling devices index the relationships between ideas in the text; relationships of sentences to paragraphs, paragraphs to one another, and to the overall theme of the text (Lorch, 1989; Goldman & Wiley 2004). The signaling devices may also help to emphasize particular aspects of content or structure, and can help readers to select aspect of the content or information they pay attention to and the others to ignore. In fact, Lorch (1989) provides a list of signaling devices used in expository prose that included titles, headings and subheadings; repetition of content to emphasize, preview, or summarise; function indicators (pointer words like *thus*, pointer phrases like *in summary*, pointer sentences like *let me summarise what has been said*); relevance indicators (e.g. *let me stress that*); enumeration devices; and typographical/graphological cues (underlining, boldface, and spatial layout such as indenting, centering).

The duty of teachers is to assist learners to identify these lexical signals and other discourse features; and show them how to use the signals to determine the overall structure of the text and the meaning. Of course, when readers and particularly language learners in L2 Situations have sufficient tools with which to understand the informational content structures and that

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information to guide their processing of the text, they have a better understanding of the texts and it also enhances their ability to remember the information in and the meaning of the texts.

### **5.1 Text Analysis**

The text under discussion is an extract from a fairly larger text on the subject. The model is used to identify the structure of the text by recognizing some lexical signals. In analyzing the text, we follow Hadley's (2004) framework with slight modifications.

Every artist's work, unless he be a hermit, creating solely for his own satisfaction and with no need of sales, is to some extent "socially conditioned", he depends upon the approval of his patrons. Social anthropologist, yet I am not aware that the social conditioning of artists has ever been seriously studied. That such study is needed for the proper appraisal of traditional African art is evident enough when we note the ingenuous assumption, current in many writings on the subject; that the carver's hand is so closely controlled by the custom of centuries that the credit for any creative imagination which is apparent in his work is due not to him but to the long succession of his predecessors. Of course, there is an element of truth in this view of the tribal artist as copyist, but it is hardly more valid for the African than for the European artist. In both cases the work of forces may vary almost infinitely. To assess the personal ingredient in an African carving is no easy matter, especially if one is confronted with a rare or unique piece in an unfamiliar style; but the considerations involved are much the same as those employed in European art criticism.

### **5.2 Discussion**

#### **5.2.1 Surface Observations**

Considering the face value of the text, it can be described as a literary criticism genre. The writer discusses the issue of African art. The essay seeks to clarify the argument surrounding the social relevance (social conditioning) of every work of art and the criteria for assessing African art. Obviously, there is a pattern to this text. It can be described as a Claim/Counterclaim structure (McCarthy 1993). Usually, Claim — Counterclaim patterns are often used to support or repudiate an argument; refute opposition in political, ideological and scientific literature.

We observe another pattern that can be described as General — Specific structure. The writer opens with a general statement before dovetailing into the specifics. He then introduces the Claim — Counterclaim pattern to nullify the argument of placing the approach of European art criticism above that of African art.

#### **5.2.2 Discourse Type and signaling Devices**

Claim — Counterclaim patterns have the following features: a section of solidarity or "common ground" with the opposition, a section (or sections) where the writer's beliefs are stated as counter claims (See Holland and Lewis, 1994). The signaling devices are words/phrases or clauses which perform these functions. Some of them can be identified in the sample text above.

(a) **Signals for Common Ground** include: “Every artist’s work ... is to some extent socially conditioned”, “That such study is needed for the proper appraisal of traditional African art is evident enough...” “Of course there is an element of truth in this view...” The writer uses these lexical signals to develop a rapport with his audience. He demonstrates solidarity with them and recognizes them as part of the same community. The use of verbs in a finite tense can cause the readers (or decoders) to trust what is written as truthful (Winter, 1994; Hadley, 2004).

**(b) Signaling for Contrast**

Contrastive discourse markers are particularly useful in presenting a contrary opinion about an issue in a text. The contrastive discourse markers such as “but”, or “however” have the capacity of making the readers to feel suspicious about the claims, the argument or view of the opposing party. McCarthy (1993:31) calls them adversatives, and they are often used statement of claims made to establish the common ground in order to cancel any feeling of consensus that might have been suggested. Lines 11–12 in the text are a clear example of the use of the lexical signals.

**(c) Signaling for Claim**

After creating the sense of doubt about the claims of the opposing party, the writer then establishes a parallel plane from which to assess the two issues at stake. This would be referred to as a reinforced common ground strategy. He uses the lexical signal “...In both cases....And in both the relative strength of these two forces....” The claim signals follow immediately to buttress his argument. Lines 5–10 typify the signals for claims usually made in passive voice.

**(d) Signaling for Counterclaim**

Usually the claim signals are followed by counterclaims. We observe here that another common ground signals intervene the claim in Lines 5 – 10 and counterclaims in Lines 15 – 16. Unlike in some texts where counterclaims signal begin with contrastive discourse markers and then switch to passive. The last three lines that begin with... “To assess the personal ingredient...” Give the counterclaim a heavier weight. Interestingly, the text concludes by arguing that the same parameters must be used in assessing African and European works of art, thus implying that European literary criticism is not superior to African criticism. The writer has thus successfully made his counterclaim and establishes his own view point carefully and forcefully.

From the brief analysis done so far, it is obvious that different patterns may likely emerge from different texts depending on the content and nature of the text. In fact, other textual patterns can be found inside a larger pattern. McCarthy (1993) notes that imbedded patterns within a larger pattern serve as supporting actors by dedicating the best of their textual characteristics to strengthen the complete text.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

It has been argued in this paper that Written Discourse Analysis (WDA) reveals the inner workings of authentic texts which will help learners to understand the meaning of the contents. It may, sometimes, be difficult to clearly recognize all the textual structures or signaling devices identified as Hodge and Kress (1993) has rightly noted. However, we



believe that this model provides an innovative procedure for identifying patterns and teaching composition, literary texts especially novels. Written Discourse Analysis reveals the underlying meanings of written language in new and exciting ways (Hadley, op. cit). When applied in second language classrooms, it will help students to improve their writing skills; understand how information is presented in texts and they will have patterns to guide them in communicating their ideas clearly and forcefully. Teachers can therefore expose learners to concepts such as lexical relations, cohesive devices, signaling devices among other discourse features and markers that distinguish one text from another and that enhance extrapolation of meaning in text written in English. Martin (1985) even suggests that teachers can make use of text structures when we evaluate student essays, and choose textbooks that will be more open to a written discourse analysis approach. In Cook (1989), we are given different activities that teachers can use which utilise advantages of the insight gained from written discourse analysis.

We may safely conclude that if this model is conscientiously applied in academic discourse, it will help to improve on students' ability to write coherent texts; interpret new texts that they may come across in their classrooms; identify, understand and comprehend the contents of any texts from any discourse genre. Early exposure to this method at the secondary school levels or first year in tertiary institutions will go a long way to enhance and improve their communicative competence in the target language (English, in this case).

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